DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 175 CG 024 168

AUTHOR Palisi, Anthony T.
TITLE Self-Esteem and Love.
INSTITUTION National Academy of Counselors and Family Therapists, Inc., Springfield, NJ.
REPORT NO ISSN-1041-9985
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 13p.; "Special Edition."
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Family Letter; v11 n4-6 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Techniques; Counseling Theories; *Love; Marital Instability; *Marriage Counseling; *Self Esteem

ABSTRACT

Humans organize into constellations subjective attributes that help them to know themselves. Self-esteem refers only to those aspects of one's self-concept to which an evaluation is assigned. Self-esteem reflects one's sense of personal efficacy and worth. Love has been described as emotional closeness, passion, and decision/commitment; esteem for another; or sexual relations. Persons with high self-esteem are the people who while acknowledging a fault or faults still think of themselves as worthwhile. In contrast, those with low self-esteem think of themselves as seriously and quite possibly permanently flawed individuals. Early in existence people encode certain characteristics as being particularly enticing and, during later development, upon perceiving those attributes in another person, one's coded message pulls one toward that other person. The love that recommends marriage is variable, perhaps falling along a continuum from no-love to consummate love. Relationship problems tied to self-esteem can appear as incompatibilities; mid-life crises; perfectionism; fear of abandonment; failure to communicate; and outgrowing the relationship. In self-esteem work in couples counseling the counselor's task is to determine just what interferes with the client's developing sense of personal adequacy. That identification points the counselor's efforts in a particular direction. In this counseling each partner can be asked to live purposefully, at least in regard to examining their relationship. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

The *Family Letter*

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Anthony T. Palisi
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED344175

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF COUNSELORS & FAMILY THERAPISTS
Volume 11, Numbers **4,5,6** 1991 (Special Edition)

Self-Esteem and Love

Dear Academy Colleague,

In this *Family Letter*, I want to chat with you about the connection between self-esteem and love. In our culture, more than for any other reason, the experience of loving invites us into marriage. If, as clinical wisdom suggests, you cannot experience love from another until you respect yourself, then low self-esteem often may be implicated in many faltering or failed marriages where one or both partners identify as the mortal wound the evaporation of love for the partner.

As a couples' counselor, you probably do expect that one partner's self-esteem, upon discovery of lack of reciprocation of love, would suffer, at least, a disabling crack. And, you would somehow try to splint that fracture as part of your work. Or, as counselor, you may have judged that one of the partners, at least, has struggled all along with flagging self-esteem. And, certainly you would aim to put some starch into it even as you focus on the rending relationship.

The latter circumstance, chronically low self-esteem and its impact on a relationship, occupies my attention now. Bear with me, please, while I clarify and, in some instances, crystallize my own thinking. You will be hearing material familiar to you. But, to be helpful to me, you'll have to know on what I base my thinking.

This is how I'd like to proceed. The approach is that of the artist who first sketches lightly and then comes back to fill in the details. Initially, I consider definitions of self-esteem and love. I found more agreement in the literature about what essentially constitutes self-esteem.

What a time I had with love! Love seems to have more varieties than your supermarket has laundry detergents. As it often happens to me in the supermarket, here, too, I am bewildered by all that is shelved in the aisle called love.

Next, I'll come back to fill in, as it were, distinguishing *high* from *low* self-esteem. This introduces self-esteem's connection with both anxiety and neurosis. Then I draw on love and self-esteem, letting the picture of the relationship between the two, as I understand it, emerge. Finally, I get around to how consideration of self-esteem might influence our work with couples.

Although you're offering yourself as a sounding board, just chime in with your own comments. Let me jump-start myself by reviewing some basic material about self-esteem.

Self-Concept

You and I possess the ability, unique to humans, that permits us to observe our *self*, as though from outside of the self. Consequently, we organize into constellations subjective attributes that help us to know ourselves.

Brammer & Shostrom put it clearly. The self-concept derives from: "*I am*" (one's nature); "*I can*" (one's capacities); "*I should or should not*" (one's values), and "*I want to be*" (one's aspirations). You use those constellations as sailors use stars. They provide the map which guides your understanding of yourself, especially at moments of choice or crisis. Without some understanding of self, you are a non-entity, *i.e.*, a zero without the rim.

CG024168

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Rosenberg, too, influenced me regarding self-concept. He posits that four principles underlie the development of self-concept: (1) reflected appraisal, (2) social comparison, (3) self-attribution and (4) psychological centrality.

Reflected appraisal refers to the role that others' attitudes about you have in shaping your own sense of self. Social comparison speaks to your likening yourself to others or to perceived or real societal standards. Self-attributions derive from those observations of self over time which lead you to draw conclusions, often in an evaluative way, about the self.

And that mouthful --psychological centrality-- is your hierarchical organization of the interrelated parts of the self. You may, for example, pin more of your identity on your ability to help others than on your skills as a doodler.

Self-esteem refers only to those aspects of your self concept to which you assign an evaluation. The evaluation forms the basis of your estimate of the resources available to you to confront the vicissitudes and exigencies of life. Each of Rosenberg's four principles, I think, contains the potential for evaluative elements.

In sum, self-esteem reflects your sense of personal efficacy and worth. How critical is self-esteem? Branden, who may have coined the term, says no judgment is more important than the estimate we pass on ourselves.

Some Thoughts about Love

Right now, so much for self-esteem. Let me sketch some thoughts about of love.

Rollo May tells of four kinds of love prominent in the western tradition. One of these, *agape*, he defines as *esteem for another*. I think of Hatfield as being on the edge of a tautology. She defines love as "the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply intertwined."

Sternberg cleverly uses a triangle metaphor, with three components of love --(1) emotional closeness, (2) passion and (3) decision/commitment-- forming its vertices. Closeness, standing without the other two components, results in *liking*. Set passion alone, and you have *infatuation*; set decision/commitment independently, and you have *empty love*.

Next, Sternberg combines two components. Thus, the closeness-passion leg of the triangle yields *romantic love*; the closeness-decision/commitment leg, *companionate love* and the passion-decision/commitment leg, *fatuous love*. The combining of all three produces *consummate love*. The absence of all three equals *no love*. From that one metaphor, Sternberg describes eight (count 'em) varieties of love.

Some other authors of renown claim to write of love but describe principally sexual relations. And, I am as bewildered when authors use the same term, e.g., *romantic love*, to mean different experiences as I am when confronted by "giant size" in the supermarket.

So, I find that not only do single sentence definitions fail to enlighten me about love in its full complexity but so also do the more elaborate explanations leave me with the sense of being close but not quite there. Or, there's a sense of just having used one of those awful-tasting, antiseptic mouthwashes. But, that gives you some idea about my trek down the supermarket aisle marked *the literature of love*.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was no behavioral scientist. Neither is my mother. Browning's famous sonnet seems to me to ring more true about the nature of love than do some of truly brilliant behavioral scientists' efforts.

Try this:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love our cohesion, our passion, our decision-commitment.

Loses something, don't you think?

And, maybe my mother was right. When questioned, "What's love?" by her younger son,

she offered no lengthy discourse. Perhaps as did your mother, too, she said only, "You'll know." It could be that we need to leave to poets, to story-tellers and to our mothers the task of telling us what love is. (But, we won't.)

I've probably belabored the issue. Nonetheless, a central, perhaps unifying, idea emerges. It has to do with *esteem* --esteem for another person and esteem for self.

Now, just let me sketch a few more thoughts that lead to my eventually connecting *esteem for self* and *esteem for others*.

High & Low Self-Esteem

Many of us find it convenient to think of people as having either *high* or *low* self-esteem. It's convenient, but as you read the literature, *high* and *low* become rubber yardsticks. How low is low?

Here's my rubber yardstick. Those I bracket as high are the people who when acknowledging a fault or faults still think of themselves as worthwhile. You hear them say, for example, "I made a fool of myself." But,as Beck & Emery point out, that implies that the person does not regard *being a fool* as an essential part of the self. The late actor Steve McQueen's self-description fits the bill: "I'm a little screwed up, but I'm beautiful." The high self-esteem person, despite acknowledged deficits, believes that he or she possesses the personal resources necessary to cope with most of what life has in its bag of surprises.

Those I bracket as low in self-esteem consider themselves to be seriously and (quite possibly) permanently flawed individuals. In contrast to their counterparts, those with low self-esteem struggle to acknowledge their positive attributes. Or, when they do, they devalue those characteristics as being of little consequence. Individuals with low self-esteem in some way rebuff information that runs contrary to the belief of total unworthiness.

Others, although unaware of their membership, also belong to the group with low self-regard. Dion & Dion refer to people, e.g., those whose narcissism is salient, as having *defensive high self-esteem*. It's expensively packaged low self-regard, wouldn't you think?

Self-Esteem's Ties

Self-esteem, varying from low to high, apparently has many ties. Curran says that anxiety and worthlessness (low self esteem) are interrelated. Rosenberg recalls Angyal's hypothesis penned about 50 years ago: the complicated structure of neurosis seems to be founded on a person's feelings of worthlessness. According to Angyal, feelings of unworthiness reach into beliefs about being unlovable.

Hard data proclaim that no linear progression exists between self-esteem and severity of mental illness. (Recall that some persons diagnosed as psychotic have presented with higher self-esteem than others diagnosed as neurotic.)

Branden notes that your sense of worth relates to the degree of happiness that you think you deserve. The lower your feelings of worth, the less happiness you will expect. The self-fulfilling prophecy then recommends your behaving in ways that insure unhappiness.

Combs & Snygg use *personal sense of adequacy* as the marker distinguishing challenge from threat. The more you see yourself able to cope with situations, the more those situations present as *challenge*. *Threat*, on the other hand, exists only when you define yourself as inadequate.

Seeing a situation as a challenge brings to mind Bandura's discussion of *self-efficacy*. Self-efficacy, he says, refers to your expectation that you can successfully carry out whatever actions are required to produced a desired outcome. Self-efficacy influences the decision about your course of action. It also affects your persistence in moving toward the goal.

Bandura insists that self-efficacy is predictive only of behavior and of persistence. It does not forecast the arousal or intensity of anxiety experienced. Self-efficacy sounds as if you possess high self-esteem in relation to your ability to achieve a particular desired outcome. But, the key point is even while experiencing self-efficacy you might be very apprehensive. But those feelings will not deter you.

Low-self esteem and avoidance tendencies are interrelated. Peck sees a relationship between mental health and quickness to respond to crisis.

In summary, implicate low self-esteem with both with anxiety and neurosis. It does not follow that the lower is your self-esteem, the less tenuous is your hold on emotional stability. However, the higher your self-regard, the more happiness you think you deserve from life. The less personal regard you possess the more situations present to you as threatening, as contrasted with challenging.

Bandura's self-efficacy may be considered as task-specific self-esteem. Anxiety may be present even if you presume you have the personal resources to accomplish your mission. But, that anxiety could erode the persistence necessary for you to achieve your goal. Failure to persist, more than failure to achieve, diminishes your self-esteem. Mental health seems to be related to your promptness in addressing problems, while low self-esteem triggers avoidance mechanisms.

Falling In Love

It's time to move on. Let me now speak to some aspects of love, hopefully to draw the bolder strokes of our picture. Two views come to the fore: the experience of falling in love and the attitude of loving.

John Money compares falling in love with imprinting. He believes both before and after birth you are wired in such a way that when you later encounter particular perceptual stimuli you become victim to Cupid's arrow. You probably can name other authors who think along this line. It lends strong support to the belief that you can't *will* yourself into falling in love, doesn't it?

Money goes further; he poses the following riddle. "What have a boyfriend (or girlfriend) and a Rorschach inkblot in common? Answer: You project an image of your own on to each.

In many cases, Money contends, you do not fall in love with another person. Rather you fall for the other *as a Rorschach love-blot*. Accordingly, attribute love's "blindness" to the projection of your unique love image on to your love-blot. (Can you imagine Elizabeth Barrett Browning ever referring to Robert as her "Love-blot"?)

Signs of Love

Ethel Person adds that those who fall in love desire to be together as much as possible. When not together, each talks about the other to anyone who will listen. Or, when alone, each is likely to be daydreaming or thinking about the other, exalting her or him as the love-blot ideal. And, especially during the early stages of love, each member of the new pair broods occasionally about the uncertainties inherent in new relationships.

These manifestations apparently signal the collapse of the boundaries you have been constructing. The boundaries helped you to distinguish yourself from others. At the same time, they isolate you. There you stand, apart from the others, unique.

Falling in love flips the coin. The process of loving encourages your forsaking isolation in

favor of merging with the other person. Falling in love stimulates transcendence of self.

Additionally, other aspects of your personality begin to soften, as it were. The weight of the falling of *falling in love* heavily impacts your sense of self-worth. Perhaps during the early phases more so than at any other time, *falling in love*, as Person notes, can serve either as an agent for personal growth or as a loose cannon on the deck of human affairs.

Other commentators show less concern for *falling in love*, as a process. Yalom asserts that love is not a specific encounter but an attitude. A problem of not-being-loved, he states, more often than not is a problem of not loving.

Rosemergy argues from the same perspective. He does so by reminding us that children usually have a favorite stuffed animal. When unhappy, the child often hugs the toy. In hugging the toy, the child usually feels better. Obviously, the amelioration is not because the stuffed animal has loved the child. As a consequence of expressing love, the child feels lovable. You express love, Rosemergy says, not so much that you can receive it in kind, but so that you can be truly alive.

And in the same light, Powell holds that love is not an emotion, at all. The love that binds couples across the decades is a *decision-commitment*. The decision is to give of self, and thus to commit, to another. That's an attitude, i.e. a practiced way of looking at things.

Sources of Self-Esteem

Bednar and his associates believe that feedback from two sources --from others and from the self-- determines your level of self-esteem. The reflected appraisal, i.e. feedback from others (both positive and negative), is the lesser of the contributors. But, the experience of early love may reverse the importance of the sources of feedback. When you fall in love, external feedback, especially from your love-blot, may become the major determinant for enhancing your self-worth.

Person holds that the reflected appraisal from your love-blot changes your sense of self. She thinks that what actually allows you to fall in love is the lovely picture of yourself reflected in the other person's eyes. The reflected appraisal lets you see parts of yourself of which you may have had only dim awareness. It would seem probable, partly as a function of your love-blot's feedback, that the self-attribution, social comparison and psychological centrality aspects of your self-concept undergo change, as well.

Now, we're right in the thick of the question, "Do feelings of worthlessness lead you to conclude that you are unworthy of love? Can you experience another's love if you do not first esteem yourself?" The literature says: (1) yes, (2) no and (3) maybe. The culprit responsible for apparent equivocation may well be the rubber yardstick measuring self-esteem.

Some Varied Views

Curran's opinion is that when you are loved, you can begin to build up capital with regard to your own self worth. Horney's view differs. She says those with character neurosis (i.e. feelings of intrinsic worthlessness) are incapable of experiencing another's love. She holds, however, that a severe situational neuroses (i.e., a limitation in personal functioning owing to the environment) might disappear altogether when an individual in such a state is loved by another.

But Person notes that obsessive personalities feel the freedom from ambivalence that comes with love as a liberating force. *Obsessive personality* sounds to me like what Horney labels a character neurosis.

Dion & Dion's data show that individuals with low self-esteem more than those with high self-esteem appreciate both their partners and

the relationship. Some level of loving seems to be attributed to those with low self-esteem. At the same time, those investigators say that people with low self-esteem more than their counterparts experience unrequited love. Here, it seems that people with low self-esteem might experience love and consequently enhance self-worth if only they would risk deepening existing relationships.

Yes. No. Maybe.

Bednar's group sees common among individuals with low self-esteem a dedication to impression-management. Through impression-management, you think you can blunt a negative reflected appraisal. The ploy doesn't work. You may fool the other person, but you recognize your deceitfulness. Since self-talk has the greater influence on self-esteem, impression management serves to diminish self-regard. With low self-esteem, you won't run the risk of being known by others. Love, which brings with it the desire to be known by the lover, presents a real dilemma to the person with low self-esteem.

The dilemma rarely gets to full bloom. Rather than merge, you opt for detachment. Loneliness and low self-worth are frequent traveling companions. You adopt strategies at various levels of awareness to maintain a safe, emotional, and, perhaps, physical distance.

Pepleau and her colleagues, after combing the literature, offer two explanations. One says that people with low self-worth become so invested in impression management that they suffer a self-alienation that precludes the experiencing of intimacy.

The Webs We Weave

For clarification, let me share with you one of Money's examples. He talks of a man secretly obsessed with transvestism. Without telling his woman- friend about it, the man projects onto her an image of compliance and happiness in his cross-dressing. She projects on to him an image of a savior who will deliver her from the her alcoholic father, into a life of idyllic happiness, despite the fact that she has a secret phobia of vaginal penetration. Each has a hidden agenda that neither can live up to, anymore than an inkblot can become a butterfly.

The other explanation of the low self-esteem-loneliness hypothesis is more consistent with the Bednar group. It holds that persons with low self esteem, to assuage their anxiety, avoid initiating new social contacts or deepening existing ones. Consequently, their deficit experience produces social ineptness. In turn, the social ineptness reconfirms in them attitudes of unworthiness.

The Bednar group contends that low self-esteem entices your avoiding your own disconcerting feelings, e.g., those resulting from deepening relationships. To short-circuit those feelings, you either will not enter into or long persist in activities that generate them. You retreat to comfort zones, into inertia, of sorts.

Extend the Bednar formulation of self-esteem into the arena of love. You enhance self-worth by (1) risking self-disclosure and (2) undertaking other "gulp!" experiences (e.g., deepening the relationship) even though anxiety beckons your cowardice. The lower your self-esteem, the less likely you are to let yourself authentically be known to others. You work against love's desire to be known by the lover. The lower your self-esteem the less willing you are to push through the anxiety arising from the uncertainties inherent in deepening the relationship.

From this view, it seems that if you suffer from intrinsic, low self-esteem you are *not* without capacity to love another. Rather, lacking a sense of personal adequacy, you will resist authentic self-disclosure and other "gulp!" experiences necessary for growth. You can act. You choose not to.

Branden takes a slightly different stance on the relationship between love and self-esteem. First, he says, you choose as a partner the person who will support your view of your self. Those with high self-esteem choose others of

high self-esteem. Those low on the scale find partners at their level.

Now, recall Branden's prediction. Low in a sense of personal adequacy, you will forestall experiencing more happiness than your low self-esteem says you're entitled to. Your self-fulfilling prophecy prompts your fostering vicious cycles of happiness-decreasing behaviors.

Recap

Let me go back now and weave some of these love and self-esteem threads into patterns we often see in working with couples.

Love is phyletic, i.e., you share the capacity with all other humans. Early in your existence you encoded certain characteristics as being particularly enticing to you.

During later development, upon perceiving some of those attributes in another person, your coded message pulls you toward that person. The stronger the pull, the more yours is the experience of falling in love. The projecting of *all* of your coded message on to the possessor of *some* of those qualities may be related to the Gestalt principle of closure. It's that projection that is responsible for love's blindness.

To you always belongs the choice to be open, or not, to a potentially loving experience. Your being open may be a function of your willingness to express love to others. Love is neither need nor time dependent.

The love that recommends marriage is variable, perhaps falling along a continuum from no-love (no elements) to consummate love (all elements), as suggested by the triangle model.

Assume you're attracted to another person. You estimate that this is a person of high self-esteem. Your own self-esteem is low. You conclude that if a relationship with this person were possible, it would offer more happiness than you're entitled to. Consequently, you adopt, at various levels of awareness, ploys that insure your maintaining emotional distance. You won't risk the uncertainty inherent in all new relationships. You avoid any interpersonal interaction which might or does trigger your anxiety.

You pine from a distance. Your avoidance accounts for your diminishing self-esteem.

Change the scene slightly. The other person finds in you enough of his or her code to be interested in you. Your low self-esteem sounds an alarm in you. You think that if or when the person *really* comes to know you, his or her interest will disappear.

Threatened, you leap into the role of impression manager. Now a chameleon, you try to blend with any desires, real or fantasized, of the other person. Or, you won't risk disclosure of your secret sins or shameful urges.

Now, to the somewhat predictable effect of love's blindness, you have added the opacity of impression management. And, what happens at the stroke of midnight when the carriage turns into a pumpkin, for all eyes to behold? The prince or princess gives up trying to fit the glass slipper on you. Instead, he or she gives you the boot.

Up, Down or Same

Self-esteem can rise, fall or stay essentially the same --as you permit-- during different stages of your life. Again, alter our hypothetical scene. Assume you and your partner married at a time when the levels of self-esteem were comparably low.

Neither of you does anything to alter appreciably self-regard. The prediction: both will

set into operation vicious cycles of happiness depreciating behaviors. Although bored and/or miserable, you remain together. You may even first seek and then sabotage marital therapy by winning Oscars for your roles as help-rejecting complainers.

Alter the scene one more time. Consider that you, but not your partner, significantly increase self-worth. Then, hypothesize that your enhanced self-esteem encourages increased disclosure and risk taking in relationship-enhancing behaviors. Your partner persists in happiness-decreasing behaviors. Dissatisfied, you now sense that you've outgrown the relationship. You want to spend more time with others who can reflect and support your new level of personal adequacy.

Relationship problems tied to self-esteem can appear as (1) incompatibilities; (2) mid-life crises, (3) perfectionism, (4) fear of abandonment,(5) failure to communicate and (6) outgrowing the relationship, to name the first half-dozen that come to my mind.

Self-Esteem Work in Couples Counseling

When including self-esteem remediation in couples work, remember Bednar associates' basic ideas: (1) failure to risk self-disclosure and/or (2) failure to persist in coping because of emotional pain are the factors that thwart the development of positive self-esteem. Growth occurs by moving against the cutting edge of anxiety.

For some clients, the impression management is the problem. For other clients, avoidance of behavior manifesting a loving attitude so to assuage emotional pain is the problem. For still others, both areas are problematic. One or both mechanisms will present as part of the client-counselor interaction.

The counselor's task is to determine just what interferes with the client's developing sense of personal adequacy. That identification points the counselor's efforts in a particular direction. As the mechanisms unfold during the interaction, the counselor, according to the Bednar group, highlights them.

Essentials of Self-Esteem Counseling

Following this model, the counselor understands that external (or in this case, counselor's) feedback has minimal effect on self-esteem. (Recall that individuals with low self-esteem tend to rebuff another's positive feedback.) That understanding requires that counselor elicit from the client "internal" feedback (i.e., self-talk).

Assume, for example, one partner has been an impression-manager. The counselor, using Rogerian reflection or Socratic questions, elicits from the partner that impression-management is her or his oft-repeated style. At the moment of acknowledging "impression-management" as a style, the person actually has interrupted impression management. The person has revealed an accurate portrayal of self.

The counselor highlights the change in behavior and asks how the person feels after presenting an authentic self-disclosure. The question elicits from the client *internal* feedback, the more influential source of feedback for elevating client self-esteem.

No instant therapy here, the Bednar group explains. The counselor remains alert to repeat the intervention many times. Eventually, the client follows the counselor's modeling, first by identifying her or his interfering mechanism and then by reporting the positive feelings that accompany the change.

Self-Esteem with Other Models

I believe you will find that the philosophic assumptions that undergird the Bednar *et al* work

are consonant with other counseling theories. I think that the Bednar group's approach is most easily incorporated into two broad orientations: (1) the one clustering the phenomenological, existential, experiential theories and (2) the one including the cognitive, rational-emotive models.

L'Abate & McHenry say that in these schools the task of the therapist changes from one of interpretations of intrapsychic functioning as observable behavior to one of illuminating the subjective, experiential world of the client. That world, of course, includes attitudes --the practiced way of looking at things.

Think, for example, about Bednar *et al* in relation to the Rogers' approach. Recall that the Rogerian therapist holds that behavior change is best achieved by effecting alterations in the self-concept. That change helps the client to become more congruent, less defensive, more realistic, more open to experience and more effective in problem-solving.

Authentic self-disclosure and greater persistence in the face of anxiety-inducing experiences (the goals of self-esteem work) seem to be a restatement of the goals of the client-centered therapies.

The humanistic cluster moved beyond their initial reference point of individual counseling. They realized that the format of counseling should approximate as closely as possible the social, interpersonal nature of the lives of clients. So the move to couples, marital and family counseling was a natural one.

As a second example, compare the self-esteem goals with Beck's cognitive orientation. Beck helps partners to identify faulty information processing mechanisms and/or clashing beliefs. He asks that partners recognize the emotional reactions that compel attention and influence behavior. The emphasis is on changing self-talk based on empirical data.

Self-esteem work, as described by Bednar and his associates, probably could be included in Hatfield's model for developing intimacy skills. She lists for participants four outcome goals: (1) accept self as who you are; (2) accept --don't fix-- your partner; (3) express your self through honest, graceful communication; (4) deal with your partner's reactions.

In the Hatfield approach, authentic self-disclosure is encouraged through goals one and three. Goals two and four encourage persistence in staying with uncomfortable, feared thoughts and feelings. Hatfield-Bednar Associates appears to be an easy meld.

Not All Agree

Not everyone, e.g., Branden, agrees that self-esteem enhancement can be approached as directly in therapy as Bednar *et al* think. That different view says self-esteem is a consequence --a product of internally generated practices. The task of the therapist is to create an environment that supports and reinforces the practices that strengthen self-esteem.

Branden identifies six practices as crucial and fundamental to strengthening self-esteem. He lists the practice of (1) living consciously, (2) self-acceptance, (3) self-responsibility, (4) self-assertiveness, (5) living purposefully, and (6) integrity. Apparently, the therapist's task is to create the environment in which the partners engage in these practices.

About all of these virtues the question might be asked, Branden anticipates, "To practice them, does one not need already to possess self-esteem? How then can they be the foundation of self-esteem?" Branden offers in response the *principle of reciprocal causation*. He means that behaviors that generate good self-esteem are also expressions of good self-esteem.

Guerney also sees self-esteem work as the byproduct of other efforts. In his emphasis on

developing partners' communication skill, Geurney says that the empathy resulting from authentic, considerate disclosure produces increments in self-regard of the partners. He's saying, I think, what we've all heard for a long time: a good relationship itself has curative effects.

Guerney avoids interpretation of interpersonal or intrapersonal process. So, he's not likely to accept the Bednar group's recommendations. But, I think you can the two positions in their technical eclecticism are quite compatible.

Counselor or Coroner?

Suppose, for a moment, that you accept the notion that low self-esteem in one or both partners is a problem often to be addressed in couples counseling. But, even before you have had an opportunity to make a determination that personal adequacy issues are disruptive in a particular case, one of the pair confronts you with:

"*Can you* will *yourself to love?*

Can you just tell yourself to be sexually attracted?"

Every counselor knows that despite the interrogative form of the client's statements, neither is a question. Each is a declaration. Each implies the answer, "No, *it* can't be done," and, therefore, only one logical conclusion can follow. "Let's remove the life-support system (counseling) and let's get on with the grieving."

That's what I often hear in those questions. I sense that the questioner's intention is to transform my role from that of counselor to that of a coroner. The partner wants me to pronounce the death to the relationship. In those early mo

ments, I don't want to relinquish the role of counselor.

I think what Brammer & Shostrom said 30 years ago still holds true: When asked, most people are likely to say they married for love. They cannot, if asked, verbalize what they meant then or what they mean in the present when they say they love or do not love their mates.

Partners do base so much of their decision-making about the future of their relationship on love. From the early part of this letter, you know experts, too, fail to achieve consensus about the nature of love. Fuzziness abounds.

My dilemma parallels that of those involved with medical ethics who struggle to understand exactly when life ends, when death occurs. But, this early in the counseling process, I want to be an advocate for the relationship. I'm not yet willing to be a coroner.

So, I'm likely to suggest that I not answer that question until we all understand the other's meaning of the word *love*. But, acknowledging the implied meaning of the question, I often borrow Person's observation:

> *Like water, love can evaporate and disappear, but then condenses and is again visible.*

(An aside: If you yourself want to brush up on *love*, let me suggest that either in Person or in editors Sternberg & Barnes you may find a viewpoint compatible with your own orientation to counseling. Person is psychoanalytic. Sternberg & Barnes have collected material from a wide range of orientations.)

And, what of sexual attraction? It seems to me that I can be more direct in answering. A person may have no control over what triggers the attraction. But, Kaplan informs, the neurologic mechanism is constructed in a manner such that it can be "turned off" when the brain has decided that it is not to the individual's advantage to pursue sexual pleasure. Further, she says, no sexual stimulant is so powerful --even love-- that it cannot be inhibited by fear or pain.

Money explains a couple's passion

remains at its highest level for only two to three years. So, normal progression, not interfering emotion, may account for diminishing passion. I am saying to the couple that it's too soon for us to determine the meaning behind diminished sexual attraction.

Later, I may recommend rebuilding the physical part of the relationship by successive approximation. You probably have discovered, as have I, that Masters & Johnson's sensate focusing works well here. But, that's down the road.

Sometimes, at the outset, I ask the partners to make the unwarranted assumption that current feelings --e.g., hurt or resentment-- are responsible for the "turn off" of sexual attraction. The counseling process, I suggest, often flips the switch back to the "on" position.

Allport speaks of *tentativeness* yet *commitment*, i.e. being whole-hearted but half-sure. I request that partners make tentative-commitment to their relationship and to the counseling process. Then, I like Stuart's approach, asking each of the partners to make a tentative-commitment to "Change first."

Where's the work of self-esteem in all of this?

I'm not in these first, precarious moments of the process following the Bednar *et al* model. But, I think I'm doing some of the indirect work, as Branden believes it can only be accomplished.

In delaying what appears to be a hasty decision based on some fuzzy concepts, I am asking each partner, in effect, to take responsibility. I ask them, in effect, to live purposefully, at least in regard to reexamining their relationship.

There's a parallel between Bednar *et al* and Branden ideas. The Bednar group says that increments in self-esteem come when you invest yourself in "gulp!" experiences. To commit to reexamine the relationship when feelings push you to termination is, it seems to me, the responsible thing to do. Often, "gulp!" experiences require the practice of self-responsibility.

Be skeptical, if you must, that as counselor you can directly affect enhancement of self-esteem, but do consider that chronically low self-esteem may well be the culprit behind many faltering relationships.

In the spirit of academy,

Anthony T. Palisi, Ed.D.

P.S. I have deliberately omitted quotation marks, but I have credited authors for their profound remarks. Purists may wince at the copyright dates of some publications. I never have been able to set aside works just because publication reaches back in years.

Anthony T. Palisi, Ed.D., is executive director of the National Academy of Counselors & Family Therapists, as well as co-editor of Family Letter. He is a NJ licensed psychologist in private practice.

References

Allport, G. (1962). "Psychological models for guidance." Harvard Ed. Review. 32(4).

Bandura, A.(1986). Social foundations of thought and action. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Beck, A.T. (1988). Love is never enough. NY: Harper Row.

Beck A.T. & Emery, G. (1985). Anxiety disorders and phobias. NY: Basic Books.

Bednar, R.L., Wells, M.G. & Peterson, S.R. (1989). Self-Esteem. Washington, DC: APA.

Brammer, L.M. & Shostrom, E.L. (1960). Therapeutic psychology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Branden, N. (1991, June). "What is self-esteem?" Presented at High on Esteem Conference. Keystone, CO.

Branden, N. (1988). "A vision of romantic love." in R.J. Sternberg & M.L. Barnes (Eds.) The psychology of love. New Haven,CT: Yale.

Branden, N. (1971). The disowned self. NY: Bantam.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Combs, A.W. & Snygg, D. (1949). Individual behavior. NY: Harper & Rowe.

Curran, C.A. (1968). Counseling and psychotherapy. NY: Sheed & Ward.

Dion, K.L. & Dion, K.K. (1988). "Romantic love: Individual and cultural perspectives." in R.J. Sternberg & M.L.Barnes (Eds.) The psychology of love. New Haven, CT: Yale.

Guerney, B.G. (1977). Relationship enhancement. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hatfield, E. (1988). "Passionate and companionate love. In R.J. Sternberg & M.L. Barnes, (Eds.) The psychology of love. New Haven, CT:Yale.

Horney, K. (1937) The neurotic personality in our time. New York: Norton.

Kaplan, H.S. (1979). Disorders of sexual desire. NY: Simon & Schuster.

L'Abate, L. & McHenry, S. (1983). Handbook of marital interventions. NY: Grune & Stratton.

Masters, W.H., Johnson, V.E. & Kolodny, R.C. (1986). Sex and human loving. Boston: Little,Brown.

May, R. (1969). Love and will. NY: Norton.

Money, J. (1980). Love and love sickness. Baltimore, MD: Johns-Hopkins.

Peck, M.S. (1991, July). Blame and forgiveness. Presented at National Institute for Clergy Formation, Seton Hall U., S.Orange, NJ.

Pepleau, L.A. Miceli, M. & Morasch, B. (1982). "Loneliness and self-evaluation." In L.A. Pepleau & D. Perlman (Eds). Loneliness. NY: Wiley.

Person, E.S. (1988). Dreams of love and fateful encounters. NY: Norton.

Powell, J. (1991, July). Happiness. Presented at National Institute for Clergy Formation, Seton Hall U., S.Orange, NJ.

Rosemergy, J. (1991, Feb.). "Love one another." Daily Word. V.129, N.2.

Rosenberg, M. (1979). Conceiving the self. NY: Basic Books.

Sternberg, R.J. (1988). "Triangulating love." In R.J. Sternberg & M.L. Barnes (Eds.) The psychology of love.

Stuart, R. (1980). Helping Couples Change. NY:Guilford.

Yalom, I.D. (1980). Existential psychotherapy. NY:Basic Books.

The *Family Letter*

Editors-In-Chief
Anthony T. Palisi, Ed.D.
Mary K. Blakeslee, Ph.D.

Editorial Board
Robert J. McEniry, S.J., Ph.D.
Hirsch L. Silverman, Ph.D.

ISSN 1041-9985

Published by NACFT, Inc. at Executive Director's Office, 8 times yearly. 201-379-7496
Subcription Rate: $25 annually.
NACFT supports family life education and legislation responsive to family needs, as well as quality of counseling.

National Academy of Counselors and Family Therapists, Inc.
Executive Director's Office
55 Morris Avenue
Springfield, NJ 07081-1422

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 102
VAUXHALL, NJ